




Always Best Care™
senior services
Using Your Wits



The Importance of Cognitive Fitness As We Age

Much is still unknown about dementia and how to cure it, but there is mounting scientific evidence that there are a host of things a person can do, proactively, to thwart the disease, even for those who are at a greater risk genetically. Most of these are lifestyle changes, and while it's never too early to implement those changes, ideally before symptoms occur, recent science suggests that it is never too late to start.

This multi-prong approach includes the following:

- Keeping your blood pressure and cardiovascular health in control
- Getting physical exercise several times a week – particularly aerobic exercise
- Eating a healthy diet modeled after the Mediterranean or MIND die
- Getting adequate sleep – at least 7-9 hours per night
- Socializing with others
- Exercising your brain with cognitive exercise

While each of these pieces is important, brain fitness is probably the area that we are the least familiar with. It is extremely important to exercise our brains as we age to build cognitive reserve – the brain's ability to reroute and improvise in order to get something done. Brain fitness works for anyone at any age because it is rooted in the science of neuroplasticity, the advanced science that tells us that the brain can be changed and improved regardless of how old you are. It used to be believed that the brain skills or IQ that you were born with were what you were stuck with for the rest of your life, but the ever-evolving science of neuroplasticity has proven that this is completely untrue. We now know that the brain is plastic and has the capacity to strengthen and build new neural pathways regardless of whether you are 4 or 104 years of age.

So what can you do to strengthen your brain and build cognitive reserve, you ask? You have all heard the expression "use it or lose it." This applies to your brain skills as well. Make sure you are challenging your brain every day and here are some ways you can accomplish this:

- **Read** – reading for pleasure is wonderful and helps strengthen not only our auditory processing, but our visual processing skills as we build a movie in our mind as the story unfolds. Equally, if not more important, is reading to learn something new. Challenging your brain to learn about something you are unfamiliar with strengthens attention and memory.

- **Do everyday routines a different way.** If you normally brush your teeth with your right hand, next time brush with your left. The same goes for eating with utensils and even navigating. We tend to always drive the same route or walk the same paths in our homes and offices. Get out of your comfort zone by walking or driving a new path and expand your visualization, attention and memory skills. A recent study published in the journal *Neuropsychologia* challenged right-handed participants to write with their left hands. After 10 days, 89% of participants saw increases in speed and accuracy and 71% still saw improvement 6 months after the study ended, suggesting that the regular practice created new neural pathways in the brain.
- **Volunteer** – According to the National Institute on Aging, volunteering promotes brain activity and improves cognitive health. Helping others wards off social isolation, depression and loneliness, contributing to better mental and physical health, as well as improved brain skills. Try tutoring – stimulating mental activity will help keep memory and critical thinking skills sharp.
- **Learn something new.** Always wanted to learn Italian, how to play the piano or sharpen your computer skills? It's never too late. The best way to build cognitive reserve is to step out of your comfort zone and challenge your brain with learning something new.
- **Participate in music making activities.** A recent study from the University of Pittsburgh published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, examined participants over the age of 65 with mild cognitive impairment or dementia who took part in various forms of music singing and music making. The results showed a significant positive effect on cognitive function because playing music works on several areas of your brain at once. The study's author refers to music as a "full-body workout for the brain." Another benefit is that music also helps to elevate mood.
- **Socialize.** Engaging with others is essential for staving off depression and feelings of isolation. The COVID pandemic put a great strain on everyone's ability to socialize, but no group more than senior adults who have experienced brain fog and cognitive decline as a result of feeling bored, uninspired and lonely. If you are now able to interact with others, ease back into your clubs, groups and social circles again. Your brain will thank you. Many people were forced to learn new and creative ways to interact with others during this difficult time through technologies such as Zoom. Keep in mind that virtual interaction still counts as socializing and the added bonus is that you are building cognitive reserve by learning something new!

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